

Issue 2

FREE TO QUESTION

**Keeping an open mind on
God, religion, science and all
claims to absolute truth.**

*A selection of sermons preached at Mayfield
Salisbury Parish Church by the Revd Scott S. McKenna*

www.mayfieldsalisbury.org



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CONTENTS

PAGE

LONG LIVE SATAN!

4

Satan is not the beast we may believe him to be. He is certainly not a supernatural agent of evil. In the Bible, Satan is the enemy within.

THE PARTING OF THE RED SEA

9

The Bible should be read sensitively, imaginatively, spiritually and almost never literally. The myth of the parting of the Red Sea is intended for spiritual reflection. Moses was not Charlton Heston and God is not Cecil B DeMille.

HUMILITY

14

Humility may seem a bad word or idea in the present day. Humility is not humiliation; it is at the heart of the deepest spirituality and Christian discipleship.

GOD IS DEAD

19

A brief reflection on Richard Holloway's recent autobiography, 'Leaving Alexandria'. Holloway's honesty cannot be ignored or got round. What can we say about God now?

THE CHURCH IS OUT OF TOUCH

24

The Church's thinking is stuck in a time warp. Too often it applies the philosophy and ethics of the ancient or medieval world when speaking in the 21st century. No wonder people are leaving.

JESUS DIED FOR OUR SINS OR DID HE?

29

Much of the theology surrounding the death of Jesus needs revision: substitutionary atonement needs to become confined to history.

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It is a tragedy of the greatest order that the community committed to the life, teaching, death and faith of Jesus of Nazareth, that most beautiful of human beings, has got itself into a position where it is considered anti-intellectual, superstitious, literalistic, self-righteous, judgemental, irrational, bigoted, sexist and homophobic! Many, many people speak of their spirituality, their spiritual journey, but would never turn to Christianity or the Church.

Scott S McKenna

Sermons can be accessed in audio format as
well as text at www.mayfieldsalisbury.org



The Last Judgment, Jacob de Backer (16th century)

Satan is not the beast we may believe him to be. He is certainly not a supernatural agent of evil. In the Bible, Satan is the enemy within.

In the Gospel of St Matthew, chapter 16, Peter calls Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God and, at verse 18, Jesus says, ***'You are Peter and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.'*** Just five verses later, at verse 23, Jesus says to Peter, ***'Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offence to Me.'*** Jesus had spoken about conflict with the authorities in Jerusalem and his imminent death; Peter had sought to dissuade Jesus from going to the city. Jesus says, ***'Get behind Me, Satan!'*** How real is Satan to you? Is he a very present power pressing in on you, goading you, troubling your soul? In your consciousness, is he as real as Jesus? To Jesus, Satan was very real, very present and a real threat to His mission and to His soul. Is Satan an idea that we should leave behind in the Dark Ages?

The Roman Catholic philosopher, John Haldane, says that if we believe in the existence of the spiritual realm there is no evident absurdity in the idea that there are spiritual or immaterial beings, including Satan, which act in opposition to God: people act in opposition to God in this world, so why not in the spiritual realm? Haldane reflects on the book and film *The Exorcist*, which is about demonic possession and the cosmic battle between supernatural good and evil. Written in 1971 and released on film two years later, Haldane says:



Professor John Haldane

The Exorcist came in a period in which China was undergoing the Cultural Revolution with enormous costs to Buddhism and Christianity; in the Holy Land Jews and Muslims were at war; Hindus and Muslims were in conflict over Bangladesh; in Ulster Catholics and Protestants were killing one another in increasing terror; America was counting the human and moral cost of the Vietnam War, and suffering the shock of the Arab oil embargo, and in Washington itself lawful governance was shown to have been corrupted in the Watergate affair. Against this background the idea that forces of evil, additional to individual human malefactors, are at work in the world particularly disrupting and perverting the religious quest, has a certain intelligibility. Certainly [the author] Blatty meant his readers to reflect on this possibility.¹

When we consider the turmoil in world events in our time, dare we speak of supernatural evil and the power of Satan? Was it Satan who frustrated American governance in recent weeks resulting in the loss of their AAA rating? Was it Satan who unleashed anarchy on the streets of London, Manchester and elsewhere with rioting, destruction and death? Is it Satan who has brought about the humanitarian disaster in the horn of Africa? How real is Satan to you? Jesus, the central figure of our life, said to Simon Peter, ***'Get behind Me, Satan!'***

Satan, Lucifer or the Devil, is said to lure people to Hell. He is often depicted with horns, a tail or wings and with eyes that penetrate and terrify. Satan, it is said, is the personification of evil and the enemy of God. In the Gospels, Peter is not the only disciple whom Jesus identifies as demonic: in the Gospel of John, Jesus describes Judas, son of Simon Iscariot, as a devil. We may not be all that aware of Satan, but Jesus was.

¹ John Haldane *An Intelligent Person's Guide to Religion* 110

In the very first chapter of the very first Gospel, the Gospel of St Mark, Jesus is taken by the Spirit into the desert where He is tempted by Satan. Then, shortly after calling the first four of His disciples, Jesus stands in the synagogue and, while teaching, is confronted by an unclean spirit. A few verses later, though still in the first chapter, Jesus heals many people who are demon-possessed. At chapter three, Jesus' own family come to take hold of him because they think He is out of His mind and the scribes say that Jesus is *Beelzebub*, the ruler of the demons. In reply, Jesus says that it is Israel, the House of God, which has been overtaken by Satan.

In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul writes about rival teachers with different interpretations of the gospel. Those whom he believes are interpreting the gospel wrongly he calls false apostles and deceptive workers, who are the servants of Satan. In the third century AD, the ascetic, Anthony, a spiritual giant of the Church, taught his monks to picture Satan as the most intimate enemy of all, an enemy who speaks through our inner thoughts and impulses, through imagination and desire. The great reformer, Martin Luther, believed that life was a spiritual battle with Satan. In one of his hymns, he wrote of lying chained in the devil's dungeon. Luther said that we are like a donkey, at times ridden by God and at other times by the Devil. In a contemporary edition of the Roman Catholic Catechism, much is made of the Devil as he appears in the Book of Revelation. At chapter twelve, we read of the great, fiery red dragon with seven heads, ten horns and seven diadems who seeks to devour Christ and make war on all who obey the commandments of God and bear witness to Jesus. Is Satan real to you? Perhaps you have been missing out on the action all these years?

In the Old Testament, Satan meant adversary or opponent and it was often applied to a military enemy. It was also applied to an economic competitor. In the earlier part of the Old Testament period, God had the capacity to do good and evil. In the Book of Isaiah, God says, *'I form light and I create darkness.'* In the Book of Job, Satan is not a demonic, evil figure but the agent of God: he is there to test Job at God's behest. The theological problem, however, for a monotheistic faith, like ours, is how to account for the presence of evil. As time went on through the Old Testament period, in an attempt to preserve the goodness of God, the cause of evil became one step removed from God. There is a story told of King David in the Second Book of Samuel in which God urges David to take action which, in turn, leads to God's harsh judgement of David. In the later First Book of Chronicles the same story is told but this time it is Satan who is the agent who tests David.

It is easy to dismiss Satan, Lucifer or the Devil as mythology of the past which no longer has any meaning for us today. I would certainly want to distance myself from the belief that there is a spiritual or immaterial being called Satan who brings about evil in the world and I would certainly want to distance myself from all notions that there is a

Devil with horns, a tail and wings, who may or may not look like a dragon. It is my *bête noire*, literal interpretation of Scripture, which has gifted us such ridiculous notions of a spiritual being called Satan, Lucifer and the Devil. I want to dismiss such literalism, but the mythology of the past *has* something to say to us. In the Bible, Satan is almost always the enemy within. We may have notions of a supernatural being with independent existence eager to pounce on us from without but the truth is, the biblical truth is, that Satan is a personification of the enemy within.

'Get behind me, Satan!.....You are not mindful of the things of God but the things of men.'

The Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, is one of the great thinkers of our time. Sacks says that there are three kinds of evil.² The first evil is in the natural world, such as the tectonic plates which cause earthquakes and tsunamis.³ The second is that which humans commit against each other and the third is that which we commit against ourselves. The second and third evil, those we commit against others and against ourselves, are there because God created us with free will and freedom comes at a high price. Our freedom to choose and shape our future is what makes us what we are. Satan is the enemy within. Jesus says that to Simon Peter: *'Get behind me, Satan!.....You are not mindful of the things of God but the things of men.'*

The rabbi asks us to think about the story of Job again. Satan is sent by God to test Job. Job loses almost everything: his wealth, children, health and his wife loses her faith. Finally, Job breaks and for nearly thirty chapters Job rages against God, challenging God to show him how and why he deserves all that has come his way. Job curses the day he was born. Job's companions defend God; they say that God is just and that Job must have sinned to deserve this punishment. As the book reaches its climax, God, who has been absent throughout, speaks and He speaks, not with a word of comfort for Job, but with questions of His own, such as, *'Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Have you walked in the recesses of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you?'* Sacks says:

*Job is silenced. Then, in an astonishing reversal, God tells Job that he, who challenged God's justice, is right and his comforters, who defended God, are wrong. Job is then blessed with a restoration of his wealth and with more children.*⁴

² Jonathan Sacks *The Great Partnership* 244

³ Sacks notes that, without the tectonic plates, the conditions for the emergence of life would not have been right. Likewise, the copying error in the human genome, which gives rise to genetic illness, gives rise to species in the first place.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 236



Chief Rabbi Lord Sachs

Sacks point is that we are moral decision-makers: we have a choice. To some extent at least we can shape the world we live in and, what is more, God would have us rage against injustice, evil and suffering wherever we encounter it, even if that brings us into conflict with those who speak in His Name. God, who listened to Job for thirty chapters, said to Job, ***'You are right: protest against injustice, evil and suffering wherever you find it.'*** When Jesus confronts Simon Peter it is because Simon Peter is prepared to accept injustice, oppression, evil and suffering in the world and to do so for his own safety and gain. In seeking to protect Jesus from death, Simon

Peter was also thinking about himself.

Rabbi Sacks tells a joke; let me close with it:

There is a Jewish joke, a tragic one. The time, 1938, the place, a travel agency in Germany. A Jew has entered. He tells the woman at the desk that he would like to buy a ticket for a foreign journey. 'Where to?' asks the travel agent. 'What are you offering?' asks the Jew. The travel agent passes him a globe. He turns the globe slowly, looking at country after country, knowing that each has closed its doors to people of his faith. He pushes the globe back to the travel agent with the words, 'Don't you have another world?'

Satan is the enemy within. It is that voice which speaks through our inner thoughts and impulses, through imagination and desire, which comforts us when we accept injustice, evil and suffering. Satan was very real to Jesus, the early Church Fathers and the reformers precisely because they were wholly in love with the things of God. They knew and named the enemy within and it helped them to rage against and challenge the injustices, evil and suffering of the world. Long live Satan!

Bible Readings: Exodus 3: 1 – 12 & St Matthew 16: 21 – 28



Jews cross Red Sea. Fresco from Dura Europos synagogue. 244-256 AD

The Bible should be read sensitively, imaginatively, spiritually and almost never literally. The myth of the parting of the Red Sea is intended for spiritual reflection. Moses was not Charlton Heston and God is not Cecil B DeMille.

In his book, *A Devil's Chaplain*, Richard Dawkins writes briefly about miracles. Dawkins says:

The Virgin Birth, the Resurrection, the Raising of Lazarus, the manifestations of Mary and the Saints around the Catholic world, even the Old Testament miracles, all are freely used for religious propaganda, and very effective they are with an audience of unsophisticates and children.

That'll be us he's talking about!

'Every one of these miracles,' says Dawkins, ***'amounts to a scientific claim, a violation of the normal running of the natural world.'***¹ I mention Professor Dawkins from time to time because he is such an easy target. His understanding of Scripture is childish and he is spectacularly ignorant about Church history and tradition. Or, perhaps, he is wilfully deceptive. Dawkins only has one way of interpreting Scripture and that is literally: it is either black or white. Anyone who reads poetry or a decent novel will be aware that words and stories can have multiple meanings all at the same time. This is not radical stuff! But, for his purposes, Dawkins needs the Bible to read like an instruction manual for a washing machine. It is dishonest. The philosopher, Mary Midgley, says that if we want to know what a human being is, we should ask a novelist, not a biologist. There is a depth and richness to human life, to thought and consciousness, which the material scientist cannot begin to articulate.

The story of the Exodus, the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Pharaoh and the land of Egypt, is one of the most graphic and formative in human history. Cecil B DeMille's

¹ Richard Dawkins *A Devil's Chaplain* 150

film, *The Ten Commandments*, one of the most financially successful films ever made, dramatically depicts Charlton Heston as Moses at the Red Sea, with hands and staff raised, and the walls of water rising upwards opening a pathway of dry ground: unforgettable! But, like Dawkins, DeMille's film is a literal interpretation of the biblical story. Recently, in *The Guardian*, the journalist and professor of literary criticism, James Wood wrote about new atheism. Among other things, he tells the story of taking a walk with a friend of his who is an academic and a university chaplain. Wood writes:



Photo by: Shane Pope

Richard Dawkins

During the course of the conversation, [my friend] asserted: 'It is impossible to be a serious Christian and believe in heaven and hell. 'When I, who was raised in a strong and conventionally religious home, expressed surprise and suggested that once one stops believing in heaven one might as well stop believing in God, he said, more vehemently: 'It's exactly the opposite: not believing in heaven and hell is a prerequisite for serious Christian belief.'

Wood's goes on:

Trapped in the childhood literalism of my background, I had not entertained the possibility of Christian belief separated from the great lure and threat of heaven and hell.²

The Bible is predominantly a Jewish document, in which the ancients are wrestling with key existential questions: who am I? who is God? Who made the universe? What is my relationship to God? The Bible is an ancient document which records the theology, the wrestling, of the Jewish nation with questions about its origin, identity,

² These quotations are taken from James Wood's article in *The Guardian* on 27th August, 2011. The article is adapted from a recent Weidenfeld lecture at St Anne's College, Oxford.

God, God's nature and how God interacts with the world. It is not a book of sequential argument but a wrestling to and fro and, within the Bible, there is theological progression.

The Bible starts as polytheistic and ends as monotheistic; there are two distinct creation stories; there are *different* accounts of the history of Israel told in different biblical books; Satan emerges, not as some horned beast, but as a theological device to express the presence of temptation and evil and, most significantly of all, the New Testament in its entirety is a re-interpretation of ancient texts. Progression is everywhere and it did

not stop when Scriptural canon was closed. The early Church Fathers constantly re-interpreted Scripture: Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Origen and, the greatest of them all, St Augustine. Of miracles, Augustine said:

Trapped in the childhood literalism of my background, I had not entertained the possibility of Christian belief separated from the great lure and threat of heaven and hell.

If we see a piece of beautiful handwriting, we are not satisfied simply to note that the letters are formed evenly, equally and elegantly: we also want to know the meaning the letters convey. In the same way, a miracle is not like a picture, something merely to look at and admire, and to be left at that. It is much more like a piece of writing which we must learn to read and understand.

The reformers, including Luther and Calvin, re-interpreted Scripture and were not afraid to voice their criticisms of certain parts of it. Luther prioritised St John's Gospel, Romans and First Peter, while he thought the Letter of James was '*a right strawy*' epistle. Holding a copy of the Letter of James in his hand, Luther said that one of these days he would light the fire with Jimmy. Calvin, if he had his way, would have removed the Book of Revelation from the canon. Richard Dawkins has no idea what he is talking about.

The Bible, then, is theological wrestling with the most basic and urgent existential questions and, because it is predominantly a Jewish document, theology is done through story. What are we to make of the parting of the Red Sea? 'Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided.' The story of the parting of the Red Sea was written between 600 and 1000 years after the



Walking on Water Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900)

date attributed to it in the First Book of Kings, so there is no question that it is a blow by blow account of history. It is not; it is theology written through story or, if you prefer, through myth. Thomas Mann said, ***'Myth is the way things never were, but always are.'*** What are we to make of the story of the parting of the Red Sea?

I have spoken briefly about the interpretation of Scripture within Scripture itself and the Church but there is also re-interpretation of these texts within Judaism. Earlier this year, when news broke that American forces had killed Osama bin Laden, many people, including Christians, gathered outside the White House to cheer and celebrate. In some quarters, there was condemnation of this celebration but I did hear at the time the telling of a Jewish *midrash*

story which, in fact, is a comment on the biblical narrative or Torah. In the Bible, the Israelites, having safely crossed the Red Sea, sang, danced and celebrated the drowning of the Egyptians. In the *midrash* story of this celebration, it is not only the Israelites who celebrate but the angels in heaven. When God hears the angels singing and celebrating, He is furious and says, ***'My creatures are drowning in the sea and you sing songs!'*** Through the *midrash*, the rabbis express discomfort with an aspect of the biblical story. Interpretation and re-interpretation are as old as the Bible itself.

Before we enter into the story itself, it is worth noting that the parting of waters is a familiar event in the Hebrew Scriptures: it happens with Moses at the Red Sea, as well as with Joshua, his successor, at the River Jordan, and later with Elijah at the River Jordan, and then Elisha. Each time, God stops the waters, the water piles up to the right and left, and the people cross on dry ground. In one *midrash* story, rabbis place great emphasis on the fact that the Bible says that ***'Israel saw the great work that the LORD had done.'*** For them, the great event of the Red Sea was a mystical vision of the writer. What are we to make of this ancient narrative?

It is, for me, a spiritual text. It nourishes my faith. Read sensitively, it becomes part of my soul, enters my consciousness, and becomes a moment in which I encounter the Holy. This is what the Bible is: it is the Word of God, a medium through which God may speak to us, Spirit to spirit. The story of Jesus walking on the water, walking towards the disciples in their boat and Peter in the water, is a similar story: God comes to us. He will save us, which means in Him we will find wholeness, our completion and fulfilment. The story of the parting of the Red Sea is the story of a people finding their origin and identity in their relationship to God. We are told repeatedly that the Egyptians hardened their hearts to God but those who trust in the faithfulness of God will find rest for their souls. This ancient faith narrative says that there is nothing, not even the irresistible power of nature, can defeat the faithfulness and love of Yahweh for His people. And there are subtle clues: in one verse, we are told that at night the Angel of God and the pillar of cloud stand between the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Verse 20 reads, 'It was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other.' In the darkness of prayer and meditation, God is our light. The faith narrative of the Exodus as a whole is often read as God's preferential option for the poor, His bias to the oppressed and the suffering, but it is also about God's hold upon His people. He is our spiritual fulfilment and comfort, and nothing can defeat Him.

The Scottish poet, John Burnside, speaks of the mind as a big house.

You've got the parlour where you sit and have tea, your bedroom, your kitchen, your bathroom. But actually there are endless rooms around you that you don't use, and there's one room way at the back – the furnace room, maybe – where your thoughts begin. Sometime [ideas] walk all the way up to the parlour to find you before you even realised they were coming. That's how it feels for me.³

What on earth would the literalist Richard Dawkins make of John Burnside's mind after that description?! We are so much deeper and more complex than any biologist could ever articulate and I find that God is best encountered in the darkness of prayer and reflection than in any so-called supernatural miraculous event. The faith narrative of the Red Sea says to me that the Mysterious God Who is the centre of all life is a God of compassion, that He is faithful and that there is nothing in this universe, no conceivable power, which can shake His hold upon us.

Bible Readings: Exodus 14: 19 – 31 & St Matthew 18: 21 -35

³ This quotation is taken from an interview with John Burnside in *The Guardian* 27th August, 2011



Saint Paul, Byzantine ivory relief, 6th – early 7th century (Musée de Cluny, Paris)

Humility may seem a bad word or idea in the present day. Humility is not humiliation; it is at the heart of the deepest spirituality and Christian discipleship.

In his first letter to the church community in Thessalonica, St Paul describes his conduct. The apostle says that he does not use flattering words and neither does he seek glory and praise from others. He says his work is not a cloak for covetousness, for personal gain. St Paul says to the Christians living in Thessalonica that he is bold in God to speak the gospel and he seeks not to please others and make a name for himself but rather to please God who tests the heart. In our Old Testament lesson, we hear that wonderful and beautiful account of the death of Moses. Moses is the servant of the LORD: he has led God's people from the destitution of slavery under Pharaoh in Egypt to the very edge of the Promised Land; he has many times stood in the Presence of the LORD and, supremely, Moses meets with God face-to-face. Joshua is commissioned by Moses to be the new leader of the tribes of Israel: he is described as Moses' minister or Moses' assistant but never the servant of the LORD. At times throughout the Exodus, it is difficult to tell whether it is Moses speaking or whether it is God. Moses is possessed of an almost unique intimacy with the LORD God, the creator of the universe and Israel's saviour.

St Paul speaks of his life resting on what God thinks of him and, similarly, Moses' entire life rests on his intimate relationship with the One we call God. In the Gospel of St Matthew, Jesus is asked by a lawyer, **'Which is the great commandment in the law?'** Jesus replies:

You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself.

Our attention is first drawn to God and the fact that we are to love God passionately with heart, soul and mind and, having rested there for a time, our attention is drawn to loving others. Yes, we are to love ourselves – and, in a sense, we do that quite naturally – but we are called or commanded to love others, those outside ourselves, with that same intensity and level of commitment that we love ourselves. Through our three readings this morning runs a common thread: humility. It is not a popular word or idea these days but humility lies at the heart of the deepest spirituality and is integral to Christian discipleship.

In her essay, *The Sovereignty of Good*, the agnostic writer, Iris Murdoch, concludes that humility is the **'sovereign good'**, a greater virtue than love, freedom and courage. She writes:

Humility is a rare virtue and an unfashionable one which is often hard to discern. Only rarely does one meet somebody in whom it positively shines, in whom one apprehends with amazement the absence of the anxious avaricious tentacles of the self.¹

It may be that, secretly, we feel that humility is weakness and that we will only survive and thrive in the real world if we are perceived to be strong, persuasively powerful, intelligent, independent and popular. Nietzsche despised the Christian virtues, not least humility, because he said they were responsible for a slave mentality rendering us far too accepting and servile. For some at least, humility smells like weakness and something pathetic. Iris Murdoch said it is the **'sovereign good'** and I say that humility is at the heart of the deepest spirituality and is integral to Christian discipleship.

What is humility? In his Letter to the Colossians, St Paul lists five appropriate behaviours. To the church community at Colossae, he wrote, **'As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience.'** In the First Letter of Peter, the author encourages the Church with these words: 'Finally, all of you, have unity of Spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart and a humble mind.' In another letter, this time to the church community in

¹ Iris Murdoch *The Sovereignty of Good* 103

Ephesus, Paul says, *'I....beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.'* Again and again, humility: what is it?

Humility means having a positive and honest perspective on reality. It is about seeing ourselves in true perspective. Humility does not mean a false piety or meekness, subservience or an unduly negative attitude towards oneself. A humble person is a person whose self-understanding is honest and fair and who acknowledges the nature of the relationship with God and others. One writer puts it this way:

Humility is the ability, without prejudice to one's self-comfort to admit one's inferiority, in this or that respect to another. And it is the ability, without increment to one's self-comfort or prejudice to the quality of one's relationship with another, to remark one's superiority, in this or that respect to another.....it is an emotional independence of one's judgements concerning how one ranks vis-à-vis other human beings.²

Humility means having a right perspective on ourselves and others, an honest, healthy and fair estimation of who we are and whose we are. Humility means honestly and fairly appreciating our place in the cosmos and in our relationships with others.

In his book, *The Right Attitude to Rain*, Alexander McCall Smith's heroine is the philosopher Isabel Dalhousie. One evening, Isabel stares into space:

She looked heavenwards, and felt dizzied, as she always did when she looked up into an empty sky; the eye looked for something, some finite point to alight upon, and saw nothing. It might make one dizzy, she told herself, but it might make one humble too. Our human pretensions, our sense that I were what mattered: all this was put in its proper place by simply looking up at the sky and realising how very tiny and insignificant we were.³

Without a doubt, we are absolutely tiny, almost to the point of 'infinite insignificance' and we live in a universe which seems indifferent to our presence. Of course, we have more consciousness within us than an infinite number of stars but we are just tiny 'particles' in a corner of the cosmos. That sense of proportion both to the size and complexity of the universe and to the Creator who holds and sustains it is a step on our journey of humility. We are held in being for every breath we take by the love of God.

Humility applies also to our relationships with others. The spiritual writer, Barbara Brown Taylor, commends going barefoot as a spiritual practice. At the beginning of

² Robert Roberts *Spiritual Emotions* 83

³ Alexander McCall Smith *The Right Attitude to Rain* 164



Moses José de Ribera (1591–1652)

the Exodus story, at Mount Horeb, the mountain of God, God says to Moses, ‘Do not draw near this place. Take the sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground. Shoes are never worn in mosques or Hindu temples and it is a salutary experience for Christians to stoop or bend to take off their shoes. Barbara Brown Taylor says:

Take off your shoes and feel the earth under your feet, as if the ground on which you are standing really is holy ground. Let it please you. Let it hurt you a little. Feel how the world really feels when you do not strap little tanks on your feet to shield you from the way things really are.⁴

Humility means an honest and fair perception of reality, a down-to-earth perception, a true perspective of who we are, of our strengths, weaknesses, gifts, vulnerabilities and of the way in which we are dependent upon others as they are on us. In our ‘barefoot discipleship’⁵, humility means ranking ourselves positively or negatively with regard to others but without rancour, without sourness, prejudice, or ill-feeling. ‘For most of us this [will be] a profound spiritual struggle’.⁶ We are not to be downcast by the fact that others are ahead of us nor find satisfaction that we are ahead of others. A humble person draws confidence from the knowledge that we live from the hand of God, are children of God, held in being by the love of God, and that we share an interdependence with others. In my experience, the best leaders within and outwith the Church display modesty, are self-effacing and are understated.

Let me say a word about humiliation. Humility is not humiliation but there is a place for learning: disciples are apprentices and we learn from Scripture, the lives of the saints and our own experience. When our illusions and delusions of who we are shattered, though this may be painful, if it means we take a step closer to who we truly are, then this is a humbling rather than a humiliating experience. When we realise that

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor *An Altar in the World* 67

⁵ Stephen Cherry *Barefoot Discipleship* 21

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41

we have been over-estimating our intellectual, physical or moral capabilities, when our arrogance is exposed, again though this may be painful, it is a humbling rather than humiliating experience. Sometimes, it is not until we reach our lowest point that we begin to learn our place in God's creation and providence. Or, let me put it another way: **'A good humiliation is one that alerts us to an aspect of ourselves, a type of behaviour, a habit or an attitude which does not speak of personal humility but of its opposite.'**⁷ Humility takes us beyond self-concern. Our response to a good humiliation is to be open and wise when it occurs. Humility means having a right, honest and fair

perspective of reality: to live from the hand of God and to live loving others as ourselves, as equals.

'A good humiliation is one that alerts us to an aspect of ourselves, a type of behaviour, a habit or an attitude which does not speak of personal humility but of its opposite.'⁷

The final point I want to make is that humility, rightly understood, does not mean timidity. On Palm Sunday, we celebrate the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. To put this stage-managed appearance on a donkey into context, the author of Matthew's Gospel quotes from the Old Testament prophet Zechariah. Zechariah says, **'Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'** The author of Matthew lifts that text, edits it and then puts it into the Gospel narrative. In Matthew, we read, **'Lo, your king comes to you; humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'** This misnomer, the triumphal entry, is, in the mind of the author, a *humble* entry. Humility need not be passive but can, in fact, be expressed through passion, rage and anger. The passionate humility of Jesus raged against the corruption and hypocrisy of the religious authorities and the injustice and suffering brought by the Roman Empire. **'Passion speaks of energy and determination, excitement and [a] willingness to suffer'**⁸ all in the name of humility. Humility means a right relationship with God, a sense of our utter dependence upon Him, the Creator of the cosmos, and a right relationship with others, an honest relationship based on a healthy and fair assessment of who we are and our gifts, talents and weaknesses. Humility is the **'sovereign good'** and humility is at the heart of the deepest spirituality and is integral to Christian discipleship. It's not always a painless journey.

Bible Readings: Deuteronomy 34: 1 – 12, 1st Thessalonians 2: 1 – 8 & St Matthew 22: 34ff

⁷ Ibid., 54

⁸ Ibid., 51



Richard Holloway. Image by Chris Booth

A brief reflection on Richard Holloway's recent autobiography, 'Leaving Alexandria'. Holloway's honesty cannot be ignored or got round. What can we say about God now?

In his autobiography, his *Epilogue* closes with these words:

What's left to say? Only this: when I die I hope my children will bring me back up here. I don't want a stone or a sign left anywhere to mark the fact that I had a life on earth before I went down the stairs to join the unnumbered dead. My name will be written in ink, and ink is the best symbol for a life. Brief. Defiant. Fading. But I hope that Ann and Sara and Mark will bring my ashes up here one October day. They can take turns carrying what's left of me in my old rucksack. Through Kitchen Moss up West Kip and East Kip to Scald Law. Because of the

wind up here, they'll have to watch where they stand when they open the box to let me out to blow away into the heather. I know now that the three of them are what I was for. It has been a great purpose being one of the instruments of their becoming. I love them, and she who bore them. Then they can make their way down..... And that'll be that. Well, almost certainly....

These are the haunting words of Richard Holloway, the former Bishop of Edinburgh and Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church. *'And that'll be that. Well, almost certainly...'* In a recent BBC Radio 4 broadcast, Holloway describes himself as a *'sick soul'*¹, a soul tortured by the unanswerable question of why? Why is the universe here and why we are here? A N Wilson says that the anguish that accompanies the struggle to find ultimate meaning is distressing but it is where humanity is at its most alive. Holloway says a healthy soul, one not bothered by ultimate questions, is suspect, but a sick soul is not a comfortable place to be.

In his book, *Leaving Alexandria*, Holloway describes some of the spiritual struggles he faced as a priest and bishop. Rightly, he does not shy away from some of the hardest questions in life. He says that over the years his relationship with God has changed. Though he worked very hard and in his church at Jeffrey Street, Old St Paul's, he met and helped many homeless people and men, usually men, who needed money or some kind of help. He regrets that he always put the parish first before his family: the caller at the door always took precedence over family meal times. He says:

We fed the hungry and visited those in prison and clothed the naked and tried to share our goods with the poor. But the dead did not rise, the lame did not walk, the blind did not see. We could help the poor of the world but we could not heal the woe of the world that made them poor and would go on making them poor for ever.

Holloway is a strong advocate of post-Holocaust theology; in other words, everything we want to say about God needs to be true of God and the Holocaust. The supernatural miraculous God of the Exodus, saving the Hebrew people at the Red Sea, is gone: dead! The God of the pillar of cloud and fire is dead! That theology will no longer suffice! Holloway tells the story of Rabbi Ernie Levy who, in 1943, was on a train to Auschwitz and the gas chambers. Levy laid the corpse of a little boy on a growing heap of bodies in the carriage. A little girl came and sat on his knee; she said, *'He was my brother.'* The rabbi said, *'He's asleep.....He'll wake up too, in a little while, with all the others, when we reach the Kingdom of Israel. There, children can find their parents, and everybody will be happy...'* A few moments later, a woman said to Levy, *'Why do you tell them this dream?'* Through tears, Levy said, *'There is no room for truth here.'* What would we say to children in Syria today, in Homs, Qubair or Deraa? Where is God? Holloway presses us with hard questions.

¹ The concept of the sick soul is taken from the American philosopher William James.

Holloway rages against theological cruelty, most particularly in the Church's abuse of gay and lesbian people *and* women. He says:

It is one thing to be in a state of ignorance – to believe that women are inferior to men, that gays are an abomination – because that is the going opinion, the prevailing worldview; it is another thing to go on holding that opinion in the face of clear evidence to the contrary because an institution, whether Bible or Church, claims not any evidential base, but simply on its own authority that what is wrong is right because it says so. Authority does not prove, it pronounces; rules rather than reasons; issues fatwas. It refuses to negotiate.

Holloway is a strong advocate of post-Holocaust theology; in other words, everything we want to say about God needs to be true of God and the Holocaust.

This week in *The Times* there was a wonderful letter explaining the Church's opposition to female priests and bishops. It reads:

The orthodox Anglican position (shared by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians) is that a female priest or bishop is simply an impossibility, like a pregnant man. Rowan Williams could perform the ordination ceremony on the wisest and most pious of women, and she would no more be a bishop (or priest) afterwards than she was at the start. A priest is someone who can dispense valid sacraments; sacramental validity comes from the Holy Spirit, via the apostolic succession. If you inserted a woman into the apostolic succession it would be like inserting an insulator into an electrical circuit. Theologically the whole thing would go dead, and the sacraments would be only so much bread [and] wine.

It is a serious doctrinal point, and its centrality gives the lie to suggestions that traditional Anglicans are motivated by mere misogyny.

As Robert Burns put it, *'If only we could see ourselves as others see us.'* Holloway forces us to face the hardest of questions and argues that theological cruelty needs to be resisted at all costs. As a qualification on all biblical texts, Holloway takes the greatest comfort from Jesus words, *'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.'* Religion is a human construction: the mistake, which can lead to cruelty, bigotry and injustice, is to take the relative truths of each religion as absolute truth. Admitting that religion and even our sacred texts, such as the Bible, are human constructions does not in any way endanger our faith or threaten God. On the contrary, it is a maturation of our intellectual evolution.

In our Gospel lesson this morning Jesus is accused of being out of his mind. He is accused of being Satan or Beelzebub because He casts out demons. Talk of Satan may embarrass us but it is a story of its time. In rabbinic literature, King Solomon was said to command and control the demons; he was the ruler of all creatures and the winds. In one story, beasts and fowl enter his kitchen in his palace so that they may be his food. These stories are pure mythology created to demonstrate the wisdom, greatness and righteousness of the king. Re-worked in the hands of the gospel writers, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is declared more powerful than any power in this universe; not even death is stronger than God. Providing we demythologise our sacred texts and interpret them with our God-given reason, they continue to have relevance today. A problem arises when we try to take their worldview and insert it directly into our worldview.

Perhaps one of the deepest and richest passages in the whole of the New Testament comes from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. He says:

Do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day....while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The so-called *'outward man'* which is perishing is not a reference just to the body but to this whole present life. The *'outward man'* means youth, good health, old age as well as riches, honours, friendships and all other good things. Calvin said, *'The more earthly life declines, the more heavenly life advances.'* The more we transfer our thoughts to the eternity of the Kingdom of God, the more the spiritual, the ultimate real, will batter, flood and consume us. Calvin again: *'If we look around us, a moment can seem a long time, but if we lift up our heart heavenwards, a thousand years begin to be like a moment.'*

We have to feed the soul. We feed it through prayer, spiritual writing and, supremely,



the practice of stillness. Sitting in your front room, acknowledging the noises outside and the restlessness of your thoughts - be still. Be still for five, ten or twenty minutes, an hour if you are well-practised, and listen.....appreciate the stillness. In that deep calm our perspective on life changes and, in faith, we will know ourselves embraced and cherished by the Eternal Silence which is the Life of all life. It is no concession to say that the God of the Exodus is dead when we know and feel the Presence of the Holy in our own life. It is no concession to say that many churches are still misogynist and homophobic, however they dress it up, when we know that it is the things that are unseen which are eternal and the things of this world are temporary. It is not that this life does not matter but we need to see it in perspective.

The churches are not God, the Bible is not God and orthodox doctrine is not God. When we push out all the noise, all the stresses in life, all the human thoughts about God and all the dross of institutional authority; all the politics and nastiness, all the super egos, when we push them all out and be still, we give the silent God a chance to enter our soul. Edwin Muir says that he would rather scour the roads, a masterless dog, than be with those, the clever and the dull, who say that God is dead, when, he writes, ***'I can hear daily his dying whisper in my ear.'***²

It is that whisper which nourishes the sick soul and yet keeps it wanting more.

Bible Readings: 2 Corinthians 4: 13 – 5 & 1 St Mark 3: 20 – 35

² Edwin Muir *One Foot in Eden, 'They Could Not Tell Me'*



Luther burning papal bull of excommunication by H. Schile c.1874

The Church's thinking is stuck in a time warp. Too often it applies the philosophy and ethics of the ancient or medieval world when speaking in the 21st century. No wonder people are leaving.

In 1965, at the close of the Second Vatican Council, the pope, Paul VI, spoke of the need for the renewal of Christianity. He said that there had been a lot of discussion at the Council about church **'structures'** as well as the Protestant Reformation. However, he said that the renewal that was needed was a moral, personal and inner renewal. Some months ago, I was speaking to Albert Bogle, now the Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Albert was speaking about his work with the Vine Trust and his media company and we spoke about the Church of Scotland initiative *Church Without Walls*. Albert said that in his experience the only way to achieve anything in the church is to avoid engaging with the structures of the church. He said that the initiatives which he chose to undertake were ones that did not require him to seek permission from any court of the church. The charities which he set up are doing incredible work in the name of Christ. These charities exist because of the faith, vision and energy of one man. This morning I want to reflect briefly on the need for renewal in Christianity and some pointers about what it may look like.

The biblical scholar, Denis Nineham, says that the single biggest problem facing Christianity today is a metaphysical difficulty. In other words, Christianity is a product of the ancient world and the Christian religion's understanding of the nature of reality is shaped by early Judaism and the thought of Greek thinkers, such as Plato and

Aristotle. On top of that, Christianity has accumulated the insights and wisdom of the medieval period and the Protestant Reformation. Denis Nineham argues that we now need to take another leap forward and re-state our faith in our scientific age. He says:

The characteristic difficulty today is a metaphysical difficulty at least in this sense: where men seem to need help above all is at the level of imagination. They need some way of envisaging such realities as God, creation and providence imaginatively in a way which does no violence to the rest of what they know to be true. They need to be able to mesh-in their religious symbols with the rest of their sensibility in the sort of way supranaturalist and messianic imagery meshed-in with the sensibility of 1st century people.

We need to re-state our faith in ways that do no violence to our understanding of reality. As I said last week, we need to replace the God of the Exodus with the God of the Holocaust. We need to speak and speak confidently of God's *interaction* with creation and not God's *intervention* in it, of God's respect for creation and not God's unsolicited redemption of it.

A few weeks ago I listened on *Youtube* to David Attenborough being interviewed on BBC Four. He said he had not had a religious upbringing nor had he ever had faith. On the programme, he spoke about Darwin's theory of evolution. Attenborough went on to say that ***'all societies have sought an explanation of the way in which human beings came into the world: Australian aboriginals think it is a rainbow serpent in the sky, the Thais think it is a sea of milk being churned by demons and a tribe of people in the Middle East thought it was a garden in which a woman was made by taking a rib from a man.'*** He said they can't all be right. Instead, Attenborough says why don't we look around us and make sense of the world that way because this evidence is the same everywhere. He said ***'I find it far more awesome, wonderful, that our appearance in the world should be the culmination or one of the latest products of 3000 million years of organic evolution than a conjuring trick with a rib.'*** He then went on to say, ***'I can't believe each species was brought into existence by a merciful God who cares about human beings for obvious reasons: why is there so much pain, so much disaster, why are some animals tortured in many ways and why are human beings tortured by all kinds of parasites? I can't believe God created parasites in order to torture small children.'***

At first, I could not get over the fact that Attenborough reads the poetic mythology of the Garden of Eden as if it were a scientific manual. I was then annoyed with him for his sleight of hand: he said that at the time of Darwin the prevailing view was that God had created each creature individually and that Darwin had blown that thinking out of the water. Attenborough's subtext was that science had trumped religion. He forgot to mention that creationism, each creature

being individually created by God, was in fact the prevailing scientific view. However, my point is that our understanding of God in the 21st century can do no violence to the theory of evolution. We need to let the complexity and diversity of the universe, its randomness and chance, inform our understanding of the God we worship.

Attenborough rightly raised the question of suffering. He said, *'I can't believe God created parasites to torture small children.'* Attenborough has to be right, surely? And if he is right there can be no place for torture in God's scheme, in other words, no place for hell. Our forebears may have believed in hell, a place of punishment and torture for sinners, but we don't believe that, surely? Christianity needs to take an imaginative leap forward.

We need to speak and speak confidently of God's interaction with creation and not God's intervention in it, of God's respect for creation and not God's unsolicited redemption of it.

We need also to tackle the interpretation of Scripture. Part of our difficulty in the churches lies in our approach to Scripture. There is a wonderful Jewish saying which is that if there are four rabbis in a room discussing the Torah there will be at least six opinions! The Bible is full of stories which express a people's understanding of themselves and their relationship to God. A couple of weeks ago on Radio 4 there was a programme about King Solomon. Three academics discussed what we know about David's son. Solomon is renowned for his wisdom and for leading the tribes of Israel in peace and prosperity for decades. It was Solomon who had the temple built. But, how much evidence is there for Solomon and how much is mythology? There is no archaeological evidence for the temple at all and much of the detail is believed to be hagiography, such as Solomon having 300 concubines and 700 wives. The texts concerning Solomon were written 400 years after he is believed to have lived. The story of Solomon, like many, if not all, stories in the Old Testament is not history. It is theology: a record of God's dealings with the tribes of Israel. It is always theology, theology in story-form. Solomon prays for wisdom and God blesses him.

The Church is in a terrible mess over the interpretation of Scripture. People still want the Red Sea to part, Elijah to be airlifted to heaven, a virgin birth, a guiding star; people want Jesus miraculously or better magically to cure their every ailment as well as walk on water, to disappear up into heaven and sit at the right hand of God. Every one of

these examples, literally understood, does violence to the universe as we understand it. So long as the Church clings to a literalist interpretation of Scripture and to the supranaturalist and messianic imagery of the ancient world, we will continue to decline in a scientific age.

Ethically, we are in trouble. By unthinkingly adopting the ancient and medieval philosophy of the 'sanctity' of life, the churches are confused and inconsistent about abortion, IVF treatment, stem cell research and assisted dying. Taken together, these are vital issues of our day and the churches are way behind the curve. We often look out of touch because we are out of touch, present company excepted! In all these debates, there is little or no acknowledgement that in our evolutionary universe, we have a God-given ability to responsibly co-create with God. On Friday last I took part in a discussion on Radio Scotland about the departure of St George's Tron from the Church of Scotland. One of the ministers in the discussion said that the Bible was clear on the issue of same-sex relationships. Graciously, I said that that was not true. There were no green eco-congregations in the first century because that was not one of their issues and neither were loving, committed relationships with two people of the same gender. Our interpretation of Scripture together with an inappropriate use of ancient and medieval philosophy is driving the Church into the ground in our society.

I believe that one of the ways forward is the moral, personal and inner renewal of which Pope Paul spoke. In faith, let us see where this takes us. In the story of David, the shepherd boy, the prophet Samuel says that God, the LORD, looks at the heart. David is described as ruddy, with bright eyes and good-looking, but what mattered was what God saw in David's heart. In this very small young boy, God saw great things. Jesus used parables to teach and parables draw in the reader. In the parable of the mustard seed, we may feel ourselves drawn and, having being drawn in, we feel the mustard seed, the Kingdom of God, is within us. God is within us and from this smallest of beginnings, new and great things are possible; our world is transfigured and transformed by the knowledge that the Kingdom is within us, each of us. St Paul says that as long as we are at home in this body, in this world and its values, we will be absent from the Lord. But once we let the mustard seed be buried in us the Kingdom will begin to grow. We need that inner, personal renewal.

Each time we take that step, each and every time we feel or contemplate God within us, the deeper and more secure our relationship with God will be. In the face of our sisters and brothers of other world faiths, the Church must stop once and for all its exclusive claims to salvation: God is bigger than Christianity. Let us walk with others of faith and let us listen for the voice of God in their stories and tradition; let us respect one another as fellow pilgrims.

Let me close with three short poems of the heart:



*Keep silence, that you may hear Him speaking
Words unutterable by tongue in speech.
Keep silence, that you may hear from that Sun
Things inexpressible in books and discourses.
Keep silence, that the Spirit may speak to you.....*

.....

*The heart's a river deeper than the sea.
Who can within its deepest secret see?
In the heart are storms and waves
And ships that have sunk without trace;
In the heart are lit the lamps
That rival the heavenly stars!
He who dwells in the heart's domain
Will for ever with the Lord remain!*

.....

*Destroy the mosque!
Destroy the temple!
Destroy whatever you please.
Do not break the human heart,
For God
Dwells therein!*

Three poems of the heart, three poems of Sufi verse from the early mystics of Islam, which echo the teaching of Samuel, Jesus and Paul. The Church is in need of renewal.

Bible Readings: Samuel 15: 34 – 16: 13, 2 Corinthians 5: 6 – 10, 14 – 17 & St Mark 4: 26 – 34l.



Crucifixion of Christ by Jazet Eugène (1815/ 1856)

Much of the theology surrounding the death of Jesus needs revision: substitutionary atonement needs to be confined to history.

Jesus died for our sins or did He? We learn from a very early age that Jesus died for our sins. It is sometimes said that congregations get their theology from the words of hymns, not from sermons – not in this congregation, I'm sure, but set to music and repeated often the words of hymns may well shape our theology more than we know. Jesus died for our sins: do you recognise any of these words from hymns:

*Here is a green hill far away,
outside a city wall,
where the dear Lord was crucified,
who died to save us all.*

*There was no other good enough
to pay the price of sin;
he only could unlock the gate
of heaven and let us in.*

Or,

*And can it be, that I should gain
an interest in the Saviour's blood?
Died he for me, who caused his pain –
for me, who him to death pursued?*

Or, in a modern hymn,

*In Christ alone – who took on flesh,
fullness of God in helpless Babe!
This gift of love and righteousness,
scorned by the ones he came to
saven till on that cross as Jesus
died, the wrath of God was
satisfied, for every sin on Him was
laid; here in the death of Christ I
live.*



Jesus died for our sins the hymn writers say: Jesus died to save us all, no other was good enough to pay the price of sin, died he for me, who caused his pain, and, ultimately, the wrath of God is satisfied. In many hymns and much theology, we hear that Jesus paid the debt we owed; His death was a sacrifice, an atonement for sin, an expiation of sins; we are cleansed and washed in His Blood. This theology is easily found in the writings of Calvin, in whose tradition we stand, and in the work of many other theologians besides. Of our Gospel lesson today, Calvin wrote:

For in His flesh was accomplished man's redemption; in it a sacrifice was offered to atone for sins.... [Christ's] unique giving....was made on the cross when He offered Himself to the Father as a sacrifice.

Besides debt, sacrifice and being cleansed in the Blood of Jesus, if we go back to the fourth century, to the Greek-speaking theologian, Gregory of Nyssa, we learn that Jesus' death is a victory over the Devil. Gregory believed that human beings were followers of Satan, whom he believed was an angel created by God. Human beings are under the control of Satan and Christ, as Son of God, comes to earth to free us from our slavery and bondage to sin. Jesus offers His life as a 'ransom', a payment, but Jesus tricks the Devil because, as the Son of God, after His death, He rises to life and frees human beings from slavery. By the act of resurrection, evil is conquered and God's elect are freed from Hell: incredible mythology and at its heart the belief that Jesus' death is a ransom, a payment, for our sins.

One more piece of the story: in the twelfth century, Anselm, Bishop of Canterbury, argued that sin was such an incredible offence against God that God's justice demanded reparation and the offence of sin was so great that only the Son of God could pay it. He believed that for a single sinful act not even the entire universe would be adequate compensation. Jesus died for our sins: does that mean anything to us?

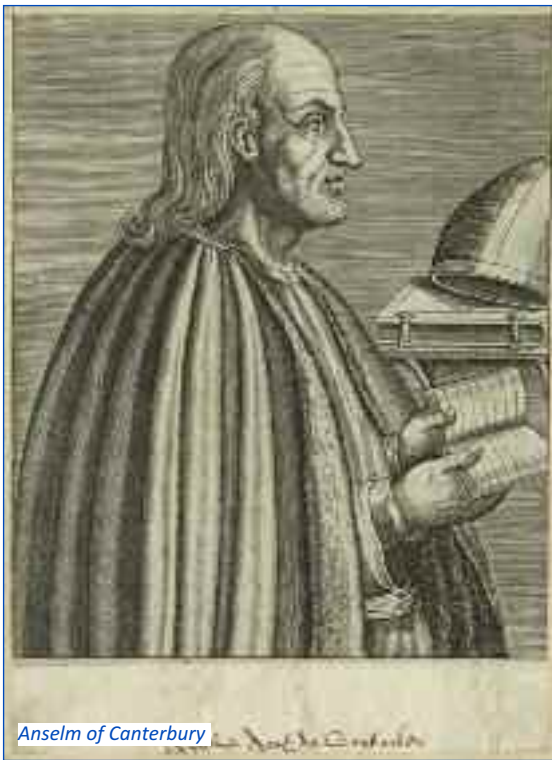
Sometime ago an elder of another church told me proudly, defiantly, that in his church he was learning the Bible. I had the good grace not to say that what he was learning was *an interpretation* of the Bible. The Bible was not beamed down from heaven with the meaning of every word established and its theology, unified theology, settled. It is not a consistent document: it cannot be written as it is over thousands of years by hundreds of different thinkers. If you remember one thing from my preaching, let it be the concept of faith narrative; if you remember things from my preaching, let it be the Jewish saying that if there are four rabbis in a room discussing the Torah there will be six opinions. Words like 'ransom', 'atone' and 'sacrifice' do appear in the Gospels and New Testament writings but the interpretation which is brought to them is the crucial issue. Do we



St. Gregory of Nyssa

believe that Jesus died for our sins, a payment made by One who was good enough, a ransom to satisfy the wrath of a just and righteous God? Do you feel cleansed by Jesus' Blood? If not, what can be said about Jesus' death and the forgiveness of sins?

At one level, the concept of debt is a good one. The metaphor of debt is a good one because it captures the deadweight of sin, its paralysing effects on the soul and mind. Anyone who has ever experienced the burden of debt will know how life-destroying it can be and, when the debt is paid and the burden lifted, lightness and joy in life returns. As a metaphor, so far, debt is a good one. It can be mentally, emotionally and spiritually crippling to live under the burden of sin, to live each day in the shadow of a sin committed, a wrong which we have done to others, a misjudgement in the face of our peers. Debt is a good metaphor and it is easy to see why such theology appeals so immediately but the mistake which is made is to literalise the metaphor. What is our debt to God? In this world, in a courtroom, human justice demands outward atonement: fines, imprisonment and, in some countries, physical infliction and death. But what is our debt to God? Our 'debt' is love and it is a 'debt' which can never be satisfied by a one-off payment. The metaphor of debt has broken down.



Anselm of Canterbury

Our relationship with God is one of love and faith and spiritual intimacy. We reach our fullest potential, realise our truest selves, in intimate union and communion with God: the conventional concept of debt is completely wrong. The concept of ransom is wrong and the concept of satisfying the justice or wrath of a Supreme Judge is wrong: we have literalised the metaphor. We have applied human justice to the spiritual life.

In the Gospel of Luke, the stories of which follow the Jewish liturgical calendar, there is the story of the woman, a prostitute, in the home of Simon the Pharisee. This corresponds to Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement. It is Luke's story of atonement. Prostitution is a

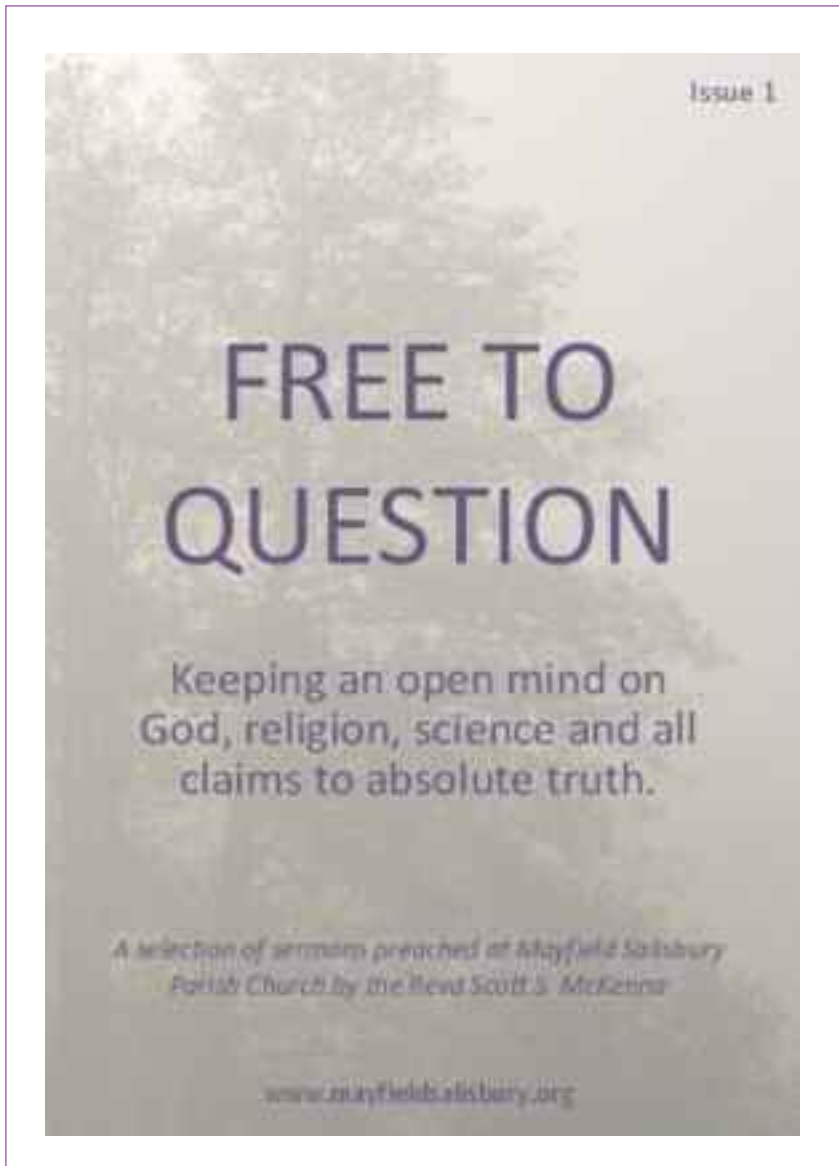
metaphor for all sin: every act or thought which breaks our marriage bond with God. In Luke's account of this story, the woman touches Jesus intimately: she washes his feet with her tears and wipes them with her hair; she kissed His feet and anointed them with oil. The Pharisee, Simon, rebukes Jesus. He replies, 'Her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little.' The Pharisee wanted God's righteousness protected and God's justice satisfied – payment needed to be made – but Jesus says she loved much and her sins are forgiven. The Bible says she 'stood at His feet behind Him weeping.' Atonement, oneness with God, comes through love – His love of us and our love of Him.

The woman's tears tell of her sense of sin, her desire to escape and overcome these. She feels the debt of her sin and, in the company of Jesus, the love that comes through His forgiveness. Our relationship with God rests in our absolute surrender to God. While it may be that we will never wholly be at one with Christ, a living faith in which we yield to the holy and seek continually to become one with the Spirit of God is our atonement and the realisation of our true selves. So, when Jesus says in John's Gospel that He will give up His life for the life of the world, it is not a payment; it is a life surrendered for truth, goodness and fidelity to conscience, a life yielded to God. That's atonement.

Bible Readings: 2 Samuel 18: 5 – 9, 15, 31 – 33 St John 6: 35, 41 – 51



Christ at Simon the Pharisee, Rubens (1577-1640)



Issue 1 of *Free to Question* contains 6 earlier sermons preached by Revd Scott S McKenna at Mayfield Salisbury. Copies are still available from the church office or can be viewed on our web site www.mayfieldsalisbury.org on the publications page.

PRAY AS YOU GO

I want to recommend the website of the Jesuit Media Initiatives. It is an excellent website to aid personal prayer. It gives guidance on preparing to pray, an eight minute review of the day and prayers for each day. The format usually involves a short meditation with spoken word, silence and music. The website also has information on retreats and Ignatian spirituality. Why not visit www.pray-as-you-go.org

Scott S. McKenna

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MAYFIELD SALISBURY PARISH CHURCH

Our doors are open to all: those sure in their faith, those living with unanswered or unanswerable questions, those living creatively with doubt, those who have been to church before, those never before over the door of a church. No matter creed (or none), sexual orientation, colour or ethnic background, you are welcome.

*Further sermons can be found
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